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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to compare the writing performance of tenth grade students across three modes of discourse. Subjects were 80 students who had been classified as "masters" or "nonmasters" of writing based on their scores on the writing section of the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills. The students were assigned three writing tasks, each of which elicited a different type of writing--expressive, explanatory, or persuasive. The results of holistic evaluation revealed that student writing performance did vary across modes of discourse, with expressive writing samples receiving the highest ratings, followed closely by persuasive writing samples. No difference was found between the performance of masters and nonmasters. The findings point out the inadequacy of using a single writing sample to judge writing competency and suggest that such items as student interest in the topic, the specific demands of the writing mode, and the variation of criteria embedded in holistic rating guides can lead to fluctuations in student scores. (Holistic scoring guides and student instructions are appended.) (FL)

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THE EFFECTS OF WRITING TASK ON MASTERY CLASSIFICATION OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS*

by

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THE EFFECTS OF WRITING TASK ON MASTERY CLASSIFICATION OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Introduction

The assessment of writing performance continues to present perplexing problems to evaluators. Particularly now, the competency/accountability movement has begun to illuminate these problems. Most experts would agree that the most valid measure of writing performance is obtained by the evaluation of writing samples. Threats to the validity of a writing test are obvious when writing is assessed solely by multiple-choice questions, precluding the entire sample of invention and production behaviors. However, assessing writing by essay sample may also compromise validity if a single sample of writing is used as a measure of overall writing ability. Performance may in fact vary significantly, depending upon the task assigned and the degree of knowledge and interest the writer has in the topic.

Previous research by the author (Prater, Padia, 1980) showed a significant difference in writing performance across three modes of discourse at grades four and six. In this study, the writing performance of tenth grade students is compared across modes of discourse. Since these tenth grade students had been administered the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS) as ninth graders, it was possible to compare the performance of two subgroups, those classified as "Master" and those classified as "Non-Masters" on the writing portion of TABS. This paper will report the differential effects of three modes of discourse for these two subgroups of tenth graders. Further, the consistency of classification decisions based on these three separate writing samples will be examined.

Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that the overall quality of writing of tenth grade students will vary depending upon the mode of discourse elicited. It is further hypothesized that essays written by "Masters" will be judged superior to those written by "Non-Masters", regardless of mode of discourse elicited. Finally, it will be of interest to observe the interaction effect of topic and mastery status.

Method

Subjects

The Ss for the study were eighty tenth grade students in a large suburban school in Texas. The school district includes families from a variety of income levels, but the majority are middle-income level. On the basis of the writing section of the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS) administered at the end of grade nine, all students had been classified as "Master" or "Non-Master" in the area of writing. Forty students from each of these two classifications were randomly selected from all available students in tenth grade to be used in the study.

Measure

Essays were scored using a 4-point focused holistic scale similar to that used in scoring the writing sample in TABS. Readers were trained to criterion performance. Each essay received two independent readings by the readers. A total score was assigned consisting of the sum of the two ratings. Essays receiving initial scores that varied by more than one point were given a third reading by a session leader. Twice the arbitrated score was then used as a final score.

Procedure

All students in the tenth grade wrote on each of three writing tasks within the month of October. The order of topic was randomized across teachers and sections. No instructions other than the written tasks were given. No pre-writing or warm-up activities were provided. The teacher was permitted to read the task aloud one time. Since the samples were collected early in the school year, no formal instruction in writing had been given and teacher effect was minimized.

Writing tasks which specified purpose, audience, and several structuring sentences were designed to elicit each of three types of writing. Guided by the discourse theory of Kinneavy (1971) and Lloyd-Jones (1977), each writer was asked to produce expressive, explanatory, and persuasive writing. Each type of writing may be described as follows:

> Expressive writing is discourse oriented. The focus is on the writer. The purpose of this kind of writing is to reveal feelings, attitudes, perceptions of the writer, generally about himself/herself.
>
> Explanatory writing is subject-oriented. The focus of this kind of writing is on presenting information about the subject, rather than on the writer.
>
> Persuasive writing is audience oriented. The writer takes a position and supports it in an effort to convince an audience.

All student essays were collected. Each subject was assigned an identification number. Names were removed from the papers and replaced by the identification code. Essays were read in a single one-day scoring session using high school English teachers as readers. The essays were scored for overall merit. The three writing tasks and corresponding focused holistic scoring guides are shown in Appendix A.

Analysis and Design

A two factor ANOVA with repeated measures was used. Fixed factors were "Master" "Non-Master" classification and repeated measures were three samples of writing.

In addition, consistency of "Master" "Non-Master" classification decisions based on results of the three writing samples was calculated. For this procedure, a proficiency level was assumed that is consistent with that required on the TABS writing sample. Thus, holistic scores of 2 and above were considered passing; scores of 1 or 0 were considered to be failing.

Results

The results of the analysis of variance are summarized in Table 1. The main effect for "Mastery" "Non-Mastery" classification of subjects was not statistically significant at either $p < .05$ or $p < .01$ levels. The main effect for modes of discourse (topics) was significant at $p < .01$. There was no significant interaction effect. Table 2 contains the mean, standard deviation, and sample size for each cell in the design. Table 3 contains the consistency of mastery decisions based on test results. Seventy percent of "Masters" and seventy-three percent of "Non-Masters" were identically classified on all three essays. This means that thirty percent of the "Masters" and twenty-seven percent of the "Non-Masters" varied in their status depending upon the essay used for classification.

Table 1. Summary of Analysis of Variance

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F
Mastery Classification (C)	3.50	1	3.50	0.80
Between groups (error)	340.55	78	4.37	
Topics (T)	14.23	2	7.12	5.47**
C X T interaction	0.23	2	0.12	0.09
Within groups (error)	202.87	156	1.30	

**$p < .01$

Table 2. Mean scores, standard deviations, and N's for each cell and marginals in the ANOVA design

Classification	N	Expressive	Explanatory	Persuasive	TOTALS
MASTERS	40	$\bar{X}$ 5.03 SD 1.37	$\bar{X}$ 4.50 SD 1.55	$\bar{X}$ 5.03 SD 1.78	4.85
NON-MASTERS	40	$\bar{X}$ 4.85 SD 1.64	$\bar{X}$ 4.28 SD 1.22	$\bar{X}$ 4.70 SD 1.52	4.61
TOTALS	80	$\bar{X}$ 4.94	$\bar{X}$ 4.39	$\bar{X}$ 4.86	4.73

Table 3. Consistency of "Mastery" "Non-Mastery" Decisions Based on Three Samples of Writing

Classification	N	#Identically Classified	% Identically Classified
MASTERS	40	28	70%
NON-MASTERS	40	29	73%
TOTAL	80	57	71%

Discussion

The results presented are consistent with the hypothesis that student writing performance varies across modes of discourse. Students' Expressive writing received the highest rating, followed closely by Persuasive writing. (In fact, "Masters" did equally well on both kinds of writing.) Explanatory writing was judged to be the poorest writing overall. Interest in the topic may have as much effect on performance as requirements of a particular writing mode and perhaps this topic simply did not appeal to the writers. Nonetheless, differences in writing performance do appear when the task is varied.

The results fail to support the hypothesis that performance of "Masters" would be judged superior to that of "Non-Masters". The failure to find a difference between these two groups is somewhat puzzling. However, the classification made on the basis of TABS also considers performance on multiple-choice items. Perhaps the two groups were not initially as distinct had only the essay portion been considered.

The comparison of results in consistently classifying students as to mastery status was interesting. Although the percentages of agreement (70%, 73%, 71%, respectively for Masters, Non-Masters, and total group) are not appalling, one must remember that the proficiency level set (2 or higher for passing) is very low. Since the cut-off point is set at such a minimal level of proficiency, one would expect higher percentages of agreement as to mastery status.

The findings in general point out the inadequacy of using a single writing sample to judge writing competency. Even

when supplemented with selected response type items, one essay does not provide an adequate sample to establish the content validity of such a test. Student interest in the topic, specific demands of the selected writing mode, and variation in criteria embedded in the focused holistic guides lead to fluctuations in student scores. It would seem prudent to use several essays. Then, rather than weighting a single score, as is currently done on TABS, the sum or average of several writing scores could be used. Although admittedly expensive, a truer picture of writing ability could be obtained from such a procedure. Possibly some of the objectives now tested objectively could be subsumed in the writing sample and omitted in their present form.

Finally, performance in general for all examinees on all topics was low in this study. (Means ranged from 2 to 2.5 on the three topics.) Such scores are barely passing and result in a restricted range of scores for making mastery classification decisions. The problem of drawing from the secondary student the best possible writing sample is a challenge. Perhaps over-testing in the public schools in general produces student apathy in approaching the tasks. Lack of interest in or knowledge about the subject further affect performance negatively. There seem to be compelling reasons to collect more than one writing sample, preferably on different writing occasions. Hopefully, a more accurate and stable measure of writing ability would be obtained.

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APPENDIX A

Holistic Scoring Guide - "Friendship" M1

Score of 4

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Fully develops an incident that reveals writer's feelings toward friendship or a particular friend. Choice of details enhances reader's understanding and empathy toward writer's response to the incident.
2. Displays organization and coherence. Has a clear beginning, supporting details, transitions, and conclusion.
3. Shows superior command of language structure and vocabulary.
4. Shows superior grasp of spelling and mechanics. Few, if any, errors.

Score of 3

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Relates an incident about friendship or a particular friend. Some attempt to use specific details. May describe incident without evoking empathy of reader.
2. Groups ideas into some clear plan of organization.
3. Shows adequate command of language structure and vocabulary. May use cliches or many simple sentence structures.
4. Adequate grasp of spelling and mechanics. Misspellings are primarily unfamiliar words.

Score of 2

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Mentions an incident about friendship. Does not fully develop incident description or feelings of writer with relevant details.
2. Displays minimal organization. May ramble or be repetitious.
3. Shows some command of language structure and vocabulary, but sentences are sometimes unclear and meaning sometimes not immediately apparent.
4. Many misspellings of familiar and unfamiliar words.

Score of 1

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Mentions an incident or friend. No development. May be only a sentence or two in length.
2. Lacks focus and organization. No beginning, middle, end to essay. Fails to relate sentences.
3. Lacks command of language structure and vocabulary. Sentences may be unclear.
4. Lacks sufficient grasp of spelling and mechanics for adequate communication.

Holistic Scoring Guide - "Drivers License" M2

Score of 4

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Explains clearly the necessary steps in acquiring drivers license. Includes details about requirements such as age and passing test. Clear presentation of needed information.
2. Displays organization and coherence. Has a clear beginning, supporting details, transitions, and conclusion.
3. Shows superior command of language structure and vocabulary.
4. Shows superior grasp of spelling and mechanics. Few, if any, errors.

Score of 3

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Includes most details about requirements but may leave out needed information.
2. Groups ideas into some clear plan of organization.
3. Shows adequate command of language structure and vocabulary. May use cliches or many simple sentence structures.
4. Adequate grasp of spelling and mechanics. Misspellings are primarily unfamiliar words.

Score of 2

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Sketchy explanation. May mention requirements or steps but does not elaborate.
2. Displays minimal organization. May ramble or be repetitious.
3. Shows some command of language structure and vocabulary, but sentences are sometimes unclear and meaning sometimes not immediately apparent.
4. Many misspellings of familiar and unfamiliar words.

Score of 1

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Fails to explain task. May include simple physical directions to Department of Motor Vehicles or other general statement.
2. Lacks focus and organization. No beginning, middle, end to essay. Fails to relate sentences.
3. Lacks command of language structure and vocabulary. Sentences may be unclear.
4. Lacks sufficient grasp of spelling and mechanics for adequate communication.

Figure 2

Holistic Scoring Guide - "Draft Registration" (M3)

Score of 4

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Takes a clear position on the issue and supports it with one or more good reasons. Shows evidence of development and elaboration of the major point. Uses relevant and clarifying details. (May show both sides of the issue if both are well developed).
2. Displays organization and coherence. Has a clear beginning, supporting details, transitions, and conclusion.
3. Shows superior command of language structure and vocabulary.
4. Shows superior grasp of spelling and mechanics. Few, if any, errors.

Score of 3

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Takes a position and provides adequate support. Some elaboration and detail provided.
2. Groups ideas into some clear plan of organization.
3. Shows adequate command of language structure and vocaublary. May use cliches or many simple sentence structures.
4. Adequate grasp of spelling and mechanics. Misspellings are primarily unfamiliar words.

Score of 2

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Implies or takes a position but does not elaborate or support it adequately. Lacks development. Reasoning may be simplistic.
2. Displays minimal organization. May ramble or be repetitious.
3. Shows some command of language structure and vocabulary, but sentences are sometimes unclear and meaning sometimes not immediately apparent.
4. Many misspellings of familiar and unfamiliar words.

Score of 1

Writer does all or most of the following:

1. Makes an attempt to achieve the aim of the exercise but either does not take a position or takes a position and fails to support it.
2. Lacks focus and organization. No beginning, middle, end to essay. Fails to relate sentences.
3. Lacks command of language structure and vocabulary. Sentences may be unclear.
4. Lacks sufficient grasp of spelling and mechanics for adequate communication.

Name _____

English Teacher's Name _____

Date __ _____

Time _____:_____(Began)

_____:_____(Finished)

Directions: Write a 3/4 to 1 page essay for the writing task described below. You may add your own paper if needed. You have the class period to complete the essay.

Writing Task:

Think back to a time that a friend demonstrated true friendship to you. Write about that time or incident, describing how you felt toward the person.

M2

Name _____

English Teacher's Name _____

Date _____

Time _____:_____(Began)

_____:_____(Finished)

Directions: Write a 3/4 to 1 page essay for the writing task described below. You may add your own paper if needed. You have the class period to complete the essay.

Writing Task:

A new foreign student who speaks and understands English has enrolled at your school. Explain to him/her the steps and procedures in obtaining a driver's license in Texas. Your explanation should be so clear that he/she could follow your directions without further help.

Name _____

English Teacher's Name _____

Date _____

Time _____:_____(Began)

_____:_____(Finished)

Directions: Write a 3/4 to 1 page essay for the writing task described below. You may add your own paper if needed. You have the class period to complete the essay.

Writing Task:

The present draft registration legislation requires that 18-year old males register for the draft. Do you agree with this legislation? Take a position for or against the legislation and defend it.